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ABSTRACT

Group and organizational cultures play an important role in helping people to adopt healthier lifestyles. Culture can be assessed by looking at social expectations for behavior, called group norms. Cultural norms can be changed to support healthy lifestyles through a systematic and participatory process. Such a change effort would modify: (1) modeling behavior; (2) rewards; (3) confrontation; (4) training; (5) orientation; (6) relationship formation; (7) resource allocation; and (8) communication. In addition, a systematic culture change process would introduce change on a number of levels through: (1) individual action plans; (2) work group or team efforts; (3) leadership development; and (4) organizational task forces. (Author)

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CHANGING GROUP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES TO SUPPORT HEALTHY LIFESTYLES

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Paper presented at the 1989 National Wellness Conference, Stevens Point, Wisconsin.

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ABSTRACT

Group and organizational cultures play an important role in helping people to adopt healthier lifestyles. Culture can be assessed by looking at social expectations for behavior, called group norms. Cultural norms can be changed to support healthy lifestyles through a systematic and participatory process. Such a change effort would modify: (1) modeling behavior; (2) rewards; (3) confrontation; (4) training; (5) orientation; (6) relationship formation; (7) resource allocation; and (8) communication. In addition, a systematic culture change process would introduce change on a number of levels through: (1) individual action plans; (2) work group or team efforts; (3) leadership development; and (4) organizational task forces.

> Some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls came and devoured them up; some fell upon stony places... and because they had no root, withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprung up, and choked them; but others fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit...."
>
> Matthew 13: 4-8

At the 1988 National Wellness Conference, Sister Miriam MacGillis gave an inspired address about how we are part of a living planet. Group and organizational cultures form an important part of the living planet Sister MacGillis revealed. In physical, psychological, and spiritual wellness, people are the flowers and the culture is the soil.

In Western culture it is the norm to overlook the culture when attempting to plant the seeds of lifestyle change. These individualistic and short-term support group approaches to lifestyle change bare sparse fruit. The long-term failure rates in United States health promotion programs exceed 94 percent.[1] In order to reduce this cycle of frustration and broken promises, we must focus simultaneously on the individual and the culture.

Asking people to change their health practices without changing their cultures is like asking them to reach over the Twinkies for the celery and carrots. Too few can consistently pass the test. Not because junk food tastes great, not for lack of willpower, not because we want to live poorly and die young, but because our work, family, and peer cultures support high risk lifestyles. As health promotion enthusiasts, we must recognize that our clients must either swim endlessly against the steady stream of negative cultural forces or learn to create supportive

cultural environments.

> Our need for each other is not an obstacle to overcome, but a virtue to be celebrated.
>
> Robert F. Allen

Building supportive cultural environments is the art of helping members of a culture to choose norms which better match their dreams for healthy and productive lives. At birth humans are imprinted with a need for each other. This birthright gives us a natural drive for belonging, caring and community. It also insures that our behavior will be influenced by the standard ways of behaving among the groups and organizations to which we belong. True freedom comes from choosing those group norms, or cultural expectations for behavior, which support our values. We are acculturated into accepting the norms around us, but we can step back from these standards and decide if they fully support the wellness lifestyles we would like to live.

CONDUCTING A CULTURAL ANALYSIS

> Cultural irrationality is deeply entrenched in the lives of all of us, and because of culturally imposed blinders, our view of the world does not normally transcend the limits imposed by our culture.
>
> Edward T. Hall

The first step in building a supportive cultural environment is to conduct an analysis of the existing culture. Due to the complex and often deceptive nature of organizational cultures, a multi-method analytic approach forms the basis of a cultural analysis. Strategies used for cultural analysis include in depth interviews with key decision makers, focus groups, participant observation, reviews of formal policies and procedures, and field

experiments. Frequently a battery of questionnaires are utilized including instruments designed to examine perceived norms (cultural norm indicators), perceived support for health behavior (organizational support indicators) and health risk appraisals.

QUESTIONS FOR A CULTURAL ANALYSIS

What are appropriate normative goals?

Culture change projects focus attention on critical norms which infringe upon efforts to live healthy lifestyles. Unchosen and unhealthy norms are replaced by desired norms.

* What key norms need to be changed in order to facilitate project success?

* What positive norms need to be reinforced by the intervention.

* What are the gaps between the existing cultural patterns and the norms which are desired by the members of the culture?

* What reference groups (friends, coworkers, and family) need to be involved in order to influence the members of the culture?

How will cultural influences need to be adjusted?

Eight cultural factors determine which norms take hold in a culture (modeling, rewards, training, communication, allocation of resources, orientation, relationship development, and recruitment).

* How could formal and informal leadership model desired behavior?

* How could desired behavior be rewarded and recognized in the culture?

* How could desired behavior be better integrated in what is being communicated by members of the culture?

* How could positive interpersonal relationships develop around desired behavior?

* How would human and material resources be allocated

differently to support desired norms?

* How would new people be oriented to desired behavior?

* How would people get the skills they need to practice desired behavior?

* How will people who support the desired culture be recruited from the external culture?

Does the culture enable desired change?

Creating a climate for change has been found to be related to three enabling factors-- a sense of community, a shared vision, and a positive culture.

* How could the health promotion project contribute to the sense of community which exists in the setting?

* How will participants work with individual and organizational strengths when approaching change?

* How will the program help to create a shared vision of the culture?

QUESTIONS FOR ESTABLISHING APPROPRIATE "BOTTOM-LINE" STANDARDS FOR SUCCESS

Each culture change project must establish a base-line upon which the success of effort can be measured. These goals must be sufficient to warrant a continued commitment to the effort.

* What long-term economic results should be targetted as goals of the effort?

* What are some long and short-term behavioral objectives in terms of the numbers of people practicing specific behaviors?

* What other objective measures of culture change will this project be gauged by.

INVOLVING PEOPLE IN CHANGING THEIR CULTURES

> We must work together towards change or become bugs on the windshield of history.
>
> Robert F. Allen

Once an analysis of the existing culture is complete,

members of the culture can be educated about how the culture is working in their lives. During this feedback process, participants can begin to learn to recognize group norms and the various cultural forces which shape them. They can recognize how their current lifestyles had been shaped by group norms. Participants can review past attempts at changing their lifestyles from a cultural perspective, noting how the culture supported or failed to support their objectives.

Ideally, project participants should be given an opportunity to experience a healthy alternative culture. This group experience of the desired culture instills confidence that change is possible. The creation of a healthy cultural environment can be accomplished through workshop experiences which enable people to create a sense of community, build a shared vision, and work with individual and collective strengths (i.e. the creation of a positive culture).

DEVELOPING CULTURE CHANGE INTERVENTIONS

> A society may be termed human in the measure to which its members confirm one another.
>
> Martin Buber

Once people are introduced to the opportunities available to them through supportive cultural environments, it is possible to initiate the intervention. Based upon the findings of the cultural analysis, an intervention can be tailored to the needs and resources of the culture. Initiatives are usually begun in four areas: (1) individual action plans; (2) work group or team efforts; (3) leadership development; and (4) organizational task forces.

Individual Level Interventions

Individual participants develop strategies for change based upon some form of lifestyle planning seminar and follow-up materials. At the Human Resources Institute (HRI), we assist participants in developing a six step strategy for long-term change:

1. Get the facts about the lifestyle area.
2. Develop a plan for change.
3. Find or build a supportive subculture.
4. Put your plan into action.
5. Reward yourself and have fun.
6. Reach out to help others.

Group Level Interventions

Family and peer support is the focus of interventions at the group level. Regular meetings are often held and group activities are planned which would reflect the desired culture. Sometimes the group support takes form in AA meetings or other types of formal clubs and associations. It is often helpful to combine this form of specialized support with more general support groups which involve the people who live, work, or play together on a daily basis, i.e. the "natural social environment" which will outlive the support group. In addition, group interaction with people who are working on a variety of lifestyle changes (smoking cessation, exercise, etc.) enables participants to move on and away from a preoccupation with a health risk behavior that had been so difficult to alter.

Leadership Development

Leadership development is another form of intervention which fosters culture change. Training people to teach health promotion has a powerful positive impact upon the health behavior of the trainee. When conducted with the formal and informal leaders of the organization, training in health promotion can modify what is being modeled in the setting. Such training can also play an important role in modifying such norm influences as rewards, communication, and resource allocation. The future of the wellness effort is dependent upon training new health promotion resource people. Furthermore, a cadre of formal and informal health promotion leaders enables the group or organization to communicate its message externally.

Organizational Level Interventions

At the organizational level, each norm influence area becomes a focus of intervention. Long and short-term changes are begun in the way the culture handles modeling, rewards, training, orientation, communication, resource allocation, recruitment, and relationship development. Such interventions often involve changes in formal programs and policies. Special health promotion task forces can be established to plan and follow-through on organizational changes. Frequently these task forces are set up to deal with special hot topics such as finding suitable places to exercise, developing a smoking policy, or offering healthy alternative foods in the vending machines. Task forces have also been created to handle specific norm influence areas such as an orientation task force.

Organization level changes need to be made with the

majority, if not all, of the norm influence areas simultaneously. If only a few areas are addressed, the culture tends to offset the positive effects of the efforts being made.

FARMING THE CULTURE

Successful culture change efforts are similar in many ways to good organic farming practices. Both are long-term efforts which work with the gifts of nature. The raw ingredients of culture change are the psychological bonds formed between people. These bonds represent special opportunities to share healthy and harmonious lives. In order to be effective health promotion practioners, we must learn how to adequately prepare the culture, plant the seeds of collective change, nurture collaborative efforts, and celebrate the culture's harvest. With proper care, each new year will bring a healthier and more vibrant society.

[1] Allen, J. & Allen, R. F. (1986). "From short term compliance to long term freedom: Culture-based health promotion by health professionals." American Journal of Health Promotion, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 39-47.